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## THE REORGANIZATION OF METHODS OF DEBATE IN HIGH SCHOOLS

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It has been quite the fashion for a great many years to place a high estimate upon the educational value of public debate among high-school students. Debate has been used as an awakener of interest, as a stimulus to expression, as a medium of information, and as an aid to quick thinking, to self-control, and to graceful bearing. Not infrequently one hears it said that debate affords a good training for democracy by encouraging the discussion of questions of public interest and by developing the free play of thought and the ready interchange of opinion upon policies that are of vital concern to the community.

No one who is at all familiar with high-school students would wish to underestimate the importance of some of the results which debating effects. In this matter one cannot ignore the testimony of teachers of English and composition, of teachers of history, of civics, and of oral expression. What so many praise has merit that cannot be denied.

Nevertheless, although the purposes which debate seeks to accomplish are good, the methods and some of the by-products are subject to serious criticism. For example, one of the ancient dogmas connected with the subject, a dogma which textbooks upon argumentation and debate emphasize as of prime importance, is that the purpose of debate is to enable students to arrive at the truth in any matter under discussion. Does anyone really believe that this avowed purpose is attained by the usual methods? Analysis of these methods will show that the real purpose of the participants is to win the debate, to have the glory of a triumph over opponents, and to gain honor for the faction, the class, the grade, or the school which the winners represent.

The customary method of organizing and of conducting a debate between teams representing two schools will illustrate this general tendency to subordinate truth-seeking to lower aims. The school which issues the challenge submits a list of subjects suggested for the contest. The school which accepts the challenge chooses the subject from the list submitted and grants to the challenging school the privilege of determining which side of the question it will support, the affirmative or the negative. Generally the selection of a subject is made after only a very general survey of the list. Not infrequently the selection is made upon the initiative of a faculty adviser and coach. Similarly the selection of the side to be maintained is made by the representatives of the other school after only a very inadequate study of the question and upon the advice of the coach. Then negotiations begin for the purpose of choosing a moderator and a committee of judges. Each school, though ostensibly seeking only impartial judges, is not at all unwilling to accept those who are known to be not unfriendly either to the institution, to the debaters, or to the proposition which the debaters wish to support. The method of selecting the judges and the moderator are quite suggestive of court procedure in selecting jurors for a criminal trial. The atmosphere surrounding the deliberations is one of suspicion and of distrust, bred of the fear that some kind of sharp practice will impose an unjust judge who will favor one school over another.

The preparation for the debate affords the most interesting commentary upon its purpose. Not infrequently a competition is held within the school for the purpose of selecting the members of the team. No requirement is made that the members of this team shall believe in the proposition which they support. The only requirement is that they shall worthily represent the school and gracefully, persuasively, forcefully, and effectively endeavor to gain a decision in favor of their proposition.

Usually a teacher is an adviser if not actually a coach for the contest. This teacher, like the students, feels the responsibility for gaining a victory. The loss of the debate is felt to be likely to result in unfavorable comment upon the ability of the teacher. The result is that both pupils and coach set themselves resolutely

to the task of preparing for a favorable decision from the judges. Of course both sides of the question are studied, just as a lawyer studies both sides of a case in which he is an attorney. The thought always uppermost is not, "Are we right?" but rather, "Can we win?" Consequently there is overemphasis upon favorable facts and arguments and, correlatively, either suppression or minimizing of the facts and the arguments that are unfavorable. Often the debaters are called upon to "make the worse appear the better reason."

Now it is obvious that those schools which do not follow these methods are not subject to the criticisms that have been suggested. It is not possible to deny, however, that the methods as explained are quite common—too common, in fact, to warrant the assertion that no changes are necessary.

The least of the objections that may be raised against debating in its present form is that it tends to repeat the error which has been made in our competitive athletics; that is, the error of giving intensive training to a few while the many are neglected. If there is real merit in public debate, as we all believe there is, it is unfair to give to only a few the opportunity to participate. Is it wise, at the very moment when we are on the point of making physical training and some form of athletics compulsory for all, to introduce into the intellectual realm a system which is as limited in its scope as the old system of athletics ever was in even its worst phases? If it is said in reply that many students do not wish to be trained in public debate, the answer is that those who are most unwilling are likely to be the ones who have the greatest need, the very ones who, because they are weak, shrink into obscurity with the consent of the sponsors of the present system.

A second objection to the present system is that it is not conducive to clear thinking. The schools are trying to teach children how to study, how to cultivate their reason and their judgment. To study involves clear recognition of facts and orderly arrangement and classification according to the degree of importance of those facts. The cultivation of reason and of judgment involves inductions and deductions honestly made according to the best intelligence which the pupil can command. Are these the processes that enter into the preparation for winning a debate? On the contrary,

facts must be arranged so as to tell the story that the debater wishes them to tell. The inductions and the deductions must be those which he wishes to make, not those which follow according to the natural laws of the mind. It is difficult to see how the method of debate as at present conducted can do otherwise than inhibit the fulfilment of the very purposes which are of the utmost importance in mental training.

Unless by good fortune the members of a debating team believe truly in the proposition which they try to maintain, their presentation has a tendency to hide the truth instead of revealing it. Careful observation leads to the conclusion that the oft-repeated statement that the purpose of argumentation is to discover the truth is nothing but cant. The purpose of argumentation is to convince and to persuade. The only way by which one can convince another of the truth of a proposition in which the speaker does not believe is by such a distortion of fact and such a violation of the laws of logic as to involve in confusion the mind of both participants. Is this the kind of thinking which the schools wish to encourage?

The partisanship engendered by debate is another of the evils to be reckoned with. According to the doctrine of chances it is most unlikely that any large group of pupils could have complete unanimity of opinion upon any subject of a debatable nature. And yet when the representatives of a school elect to support a certain proposition there is a kind of moral coercion of opinion under the guise of loyalty. Every student who has the social spirit feels constrained to espouse the cause which the team has undertaken to defend. Under the stress of emotional excitement many will come really to believe in doctrines which in cooler moments their judgment would not accept. This is the process which constitutes the mind of the mob. It substitutes emotion for reason and judgment. It darkens counsel and inhibits the orderly process by which educated opinion should determine public policy. The schools are the wellspring of our national life. We cannot afford to poison that life at its source.

Another count in the indictment relates to the moral effect of encouraging pupils to argue in support of propositions in which

they do not believe. In the studies of the classroom every effort is made to inculcate the love of truth. In the school shops there is a demand for honest workmanship, for the kind of manual expression in which one can take pride and of which one may say, "This is an honest product of my brain and of my hands; I am not ashamed of it; I am willing to be judged by it." Truth-seeking, an honest discovery and a frank facing of facts, and a just induction or deduction upon the basis of these facts are characteristics of the best teaching in history, in English, in mathematics, in science. It is not too much to say that in the best schools the spirit of the instruction is expressed in the scriptural promise, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." Is this the spirit of debate? Schools which follow the conventional methods are in danger of encouraging that kind of immorality which consists in disrespect for truth. By so doing they defeat their own high purposes.

Finally, what shall be said of the social effects of debate as conducted under the usual rules? It is not enough to consider the effect upon individuals. Since the schools are community institutions, established and maintained to minister to social as well as to individual needs, all school procedure must be examined with a view to determining its ultimate contribution to public welfare. It is imperative to ask, therefore, what kind of contribution to the public welfare can be made by debates in which the chief purpose of the contestants is to win a favorable decision. Obviously, every device known to the orator will be employed—skilful manipulation of words, artful periphrastic constructions, arguments that appeal to prejudice and to passion, wit that persuades even though it does not convince. Under these conditions the incentive is strong to substitute intellectual finesse for that kind of plain dealing which has for its purpose the highest interests of the public rather than the glory of the speaker. If the audience is deceived, if it is persuaded to accept doctrines contrary to the public interest, that result does not give any concern to the debater. To win is his highest purpose. The young people who participate in these debates either as speakers or as auditors are receiving the impressions which will guide their activities as

citizens. Is it wise that in their youth they should have the very subtle suggestion that it is profitable to juggle words, that shrewdness may be an acceptable substitute for frankness, and that if only one can win, it is not highly important that he should consider the means by which his purpose is achieved? The answer is plain. The great social, economic, and political problems that must be solved if our nation is to endure require frankness, honesty, fearlessness, and a desire to inform and to serve, not to deceive, the public. The nation needs honest, intellectual leaders. It has no need of demagogues. Any school procedure which tends to train demagogues instead of honest leaders is contrary to the public interest. For these reasons the present methods of conducting high-school debates are to be condemned.

If anyone is disposed to dismiss these charges with an impatient wave of the hand on the ground that the matter is by no means so critical as represented because the students are not really serious in what they say, the answer is that if debating is mere play, let us by all means frankly confess it, let us add a new sport to our list of sports, and let us no longer talk so gravely and so wisely about our sincere desire to use debate as a means of informing youth about the great problems of the world and as a means of training for the duties of citizenship. There is little likelihood, however, that the majority of those who advocate debating in the schools would consent to regard it merely as sport. With them it has the high purpose of serious business, business which all friends of the Republic will heartily approve. It should be, and it may be, an efficient agent in the formation of intelligent interest in and discriminating public opinion upon matters of vital public policy. In order to render this high service it must cease to be a mere dilettante exercise and must become a real thing connected in a vital way with the actual interests of boys and girls. So long as debating is merely a contest of wit, a rhetorical exercise designed to test the shrewdness and the linguistic skill of the participants, it will continue to make only a passing appeal to the young. At present along with several other subjects it suffers from being too academic—that is, from being too remote from experience and too loosely related to life to command

the earnest attention of boys and girls who are of an age when they are no longer content to accept an imitation of activity in place of participation in a business of real import. No real friend of debate, therefore, will be indifferent to criticisms and to suggestions that are designed to improve existing conditions.

The first requisite for the establishment of a sound debating system is that no student should be permitted to espouse a cause in which he does not believe. Real belief in the correctness of an opinion will guarantee serious expression and will promote a zealous endeavor to make that opinion prevail.

It is important, however, that opinions should not be formed hastily and rashly without regard to the merits of a question. There is too much loose thinking abroad, too much prejudice which passes for deliberate conviction. Consequently, when a subject is suggested for debate there should be most careful study and discussion before opinions are allowed to take shape. Members of a class may report statements of fact which they have discovered and summaries of opinions by authorities who have written or spoken upon the subject. Out of the discussions which follow these reports gradually will develop judgments which will have value. The members of the debating team should be selected from those who agree in their judgments upon the question. It is not expected that opinions formed thus early in life will necessarily be constant. As new light breaks upon the mind, opinions will change. The important consideration, however, is that at the time of the debate the members of each team after careful study accept as correct the proposition which they support.

In order to reduce the dangers incident to partisanship of a team as representative of a school and the dangers also of the consequent conscription of opinion, it would be well to dispense altogether with the decisions of judges. It will not be possible wholly to destroy partisanship so long as each team in a certain sense has in its keeping the reputation of an institution. To eliminate decisions, however, will make it easier for an audience to think more of the merits of the question and less of the victory of individuals whom they favor. Thus it will be easier for the debaters to have a real part in forming intelligent public opinion. The debater

will be an agent of society in guiding the thought of his audience. Besides, the presence of judges confirms the impression of unreality. When adults discuss the questions that demand their attention, no judges pass upon the merits of the debate. The results are shown either by a vote of all who are present upon a motion to adopt a certain course of action or by the ballots that are cast at a subsequent election. High-school students should be given an opportunity to debate under similar conditions of reality. To such an opportunity boys and girls will respond with more zeal than it is possible for them to show in a mere rhetorical exercise.

Another plan which would tend to eliminate partisanship would place representatives from different institutions on both teams. For example, two representatives from School A and two from School B might uphold the affirmative of a proposition and a team similarly constituted might uphold the negative. Decisions of judges under these conditions would be without prejudice to the interests of either school. Though this plan is most commendable, it is not likely to appeal very strongly to the students unless the schools succeed in arousing in advance a keen interest in the subject on its own account, a much keener intellectual interest than characterizes much of the work of the classroom.

Large possibilities for conserving the merits that are inherent in debating and for eliminating the defects that are connected with the present methods lie in the open forum. It is only fair to say, however, that the forum will be difficult to establish without a far more scholarly attitude of mind than can be found in the average high school. Teachers everywhere complain that boys and girls do not care enough about their studies; that they are altogether too willing just to "skim through"; that there is but little evidence of a desire to attain distinction in intellectual matters. All are agreed that it is highly desirable to arouse pupils to a greater zest for their studies. This apathy on the part of students ought not to surprise anyone, however, who knows how abstract much high-school instruction is and how little opportunity is given to boys and girls for self-activity and for participation rather than for absorption. No claim is made that the forum will galvanize inertia into life. Though at first it most

likely would not attract large audiences, it would bring together those who wished to gain information and those who, on account of their convictions, wish to win support for their views. The forum would offer under necessary restrictions a free opportunity to all students to express their opinions upon the subject under debate. The purpose would be to enable all who were present to have a more intelligent understanding of the subject than they had when they entered the meeting. The result would be to lay a broad foundation for opinion and to develop the leaders who best could lead that opinion by honest and sincere discussion of the issues. It is not unlikely that a secondary result would be to quicken the whole intellectual life of the school.

A forum of the kind described could be for the exclusive use of the students of one school, or it could be open to students of several schools. The speakers, however, would be representatives of opinions only, not of institutions. The partisanship and the rivalry of institutions and of persons would yield to the championship of ideas. The intellectual element in the schools would have an opportunity for the first time in many years to wield as much influence as the athletic and the social sets. It might even resume the leadership which once was peculiarly its own.

The strongest recommendation of the open forum is that it recognizes that boys and girls, though not voting citizens, are none the less actual citizens of the Republic, with the duties and the responsibilities as well as the privileges of citizenship. It gives to boys and girls an opportunity to express themselves adequately and to have a vital part in molding the opinions of their contemporaries. Thus, the open forum, free from the limitations and the defects of the formal debate as we have it now, prepares for intelligent participation of the coming generation in the decision of public questions. The nation needs intelligent thinking by all of its citizens. The forum offers the most promising opportunity to high-school students to become leaders of the thought of the nation.